50 TOP SITES

50 Uncommonly Good sites

THEY MAY NOT BE HOUSEHOLD NAMES, BUT THESE SUPER SITES OFFER GREAT DEALS ON THE STUFF YOU WANT.

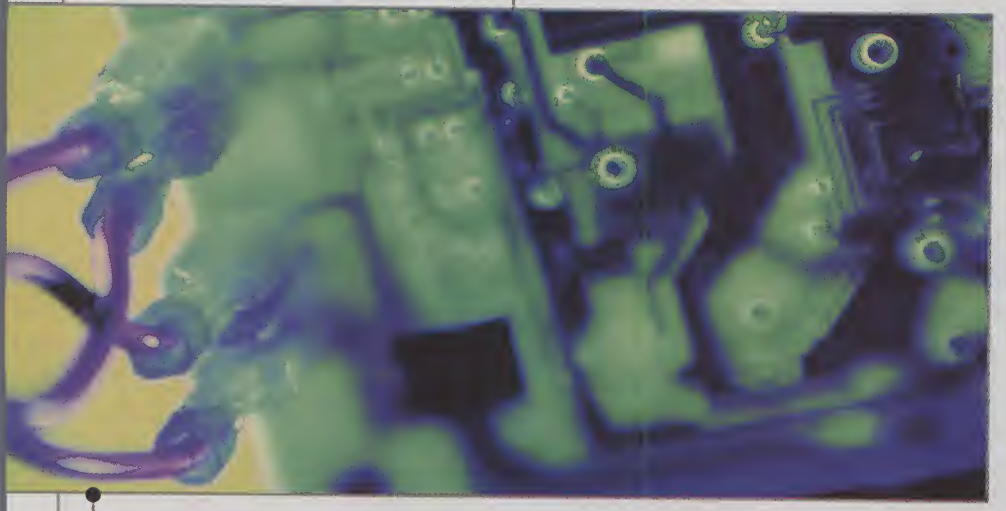
Another e-commerce story, another discussion of Amazon.com, eBay, and Outpost.com? Not this time.

It's not that we don't love shopping the mammoth e-commerce sites. We do. But you know all about them by now. The lesser-known shopping sites can be sources of hidden treasures, great deals, and, sometimes, better service than the online megastores.

We've rounded up 50 of our favorites, using quality of goods, ease of use, and reasonable customer-service policies as our criteria. Look here for lesser-known but worthwhile niche sellers or an online arm of a well-known catalog retailer. What you won't find is an overexposed site you've read about a thousand times.

BY KEVIN SAVETZ

let's get technical



IF YOU'VE GOT THE TIME AND TECHNICAL EXPERTISE, THERE'S NOTHING LIKE BUILDING A COMPUTER FROM THE GROUND UP.

At the heart of any machine is the motherboard. How do you choose one? Motherboards.com *(www.motherboards.com)* has the answer. This site offers dozens of models from seven major manufacturers. In addition to copious technical specs about each board, you'll find close-up pictures of every model and plenty of no-holds-barred reviews from previous customers.

Next, you'll need to populate that new motherboard with RAM and a processor. Although Memory Man *(www.memman.com)* sells processors and motherboards, its specialty is RAM. Here you can buy just about every conceivable type, from speedy double-data-rate RAM to SIMMs for beefing up older machines. Prices are listed in handy drop-down menus. If you don't know what kind of memory your desktop, notebook, or printer needs, the memory configurator will tell you.

Looking for a one-stop shop? Check out Memory4Less.com *(www.memory4less.com)*. The site can help fortify your PC with a new motherboard, fast processor, hard drive, and, naturally, plenty of RAM. A wide selection of batteries can give new life to your old laptop. The site's configurators show you what memory, batteries, and accessories are compatible with your system.

Frequent travelers know it takes more than batteries to make a notebook truly useful on the road. For the other essentials, visit Laptop Travel *(www.laptoptravel.com)*. The site sells automobile power adapters, carrying cases, security products, docking stations, and other expansion gadgets. Check the Travel area for electric and telephone adapter plugs, voltage converters, and modems designed for international use. As a bonus, shopping here can earn you frequent-flyer miles.

If you're the kind of shopper willing to spend an hour digging through a bin of bargain electronics products at a thrift store or computer-shop clearance area, you'll adore Computer Surplus Outlet *(www.computersurplusoutlet.com)*. The site liquidates overstocks and closeouts of computers, peripherals, and other cool but funky components. In fact, you can scrape together enough parts to build yourself an entire system. Gather up a $99 Pentium III, a $19 hard drive, and a $7 network card, and before you know it, you'll have a whole computer. Just try not to shout "It's alive!" with the manic intensity of Dr. Frankenstein.

Ready to get inundated with PC parts and peripherals? Check out Multiwave Direct *(www.mwave.com)*. From the selection within Barebone Systems you can choose case, motherboard, processor, and memory to piece together your dream system. The Top 10 Sellers and Blow Out Specials links frequently provide intriguing deals.

Aberdeen *(www.aberdeeninc.com)* gears its custom systems and computer hardware to do-it-yourselfers. Its offerings include IT products such as broadband amplifiers, hard drive duplicators, and rack-mount solutions. The selection isn't vast, but combined with the helpful specs, there's enough to satisfy. The auction arm, AberBid *(www.aberbid.com)*, offers name-your-price deals on a small selection of PC parts and software.

For low prices on peripherals, check out Comp-U-Plus *(www.compuplus.com)*. The site's overall selection is small, but the CPU, motherboard, video card, and CD-R categories are well-stocked. You can even download a printable price list of the site's inventory. Most items carry a 30-day money-back guarantee, with no restocking fee.

Dalco Electronics *(www.dalco.com)* has been hawking computer parts and accessories since 1986. The company prides itself on its selection of hard-to-find cables, connectors, case hardware, adapter cards, hard drive accessories, and network hardware. If you get stuck, live online customer support is available during business hours. Be sure to use it if you need it, because all returns are subject to a painful 20 percent restocking fee.

The selection of brand-name laptops, desktops, peripherals, and software at MEI-Micro Center *(www.mei-microcenter.com)* is

Find brand-name monitors at MEI-Micro Center.

small, but the site's prices are low and its attitude good. It's also one of the easiest-to-navigate computer-shopping sites we've seen. Indeed, the megasites could learn a lot from MEI's design. The Bargain Bin includes refurbished computers, hardware odds and ends, and software.

Some sites try to list every conceivable computer gadget. But when you're looking for something specific, it's nice to find a site with a more focused selection. Case in point: USBStuff *(www.usbstuff.com)*. The site specializes in Universal Serial Bus-compatible gadgets, including headsets, key-chain-size hard drives, and all manner of adapters, hubs, and cables.

Linux lovers have places to go, too. LinuxMall.com *(www.linuxmall.com)* sells systems and peripherals, software, a whole family of stuffed penguins, and other essentials for folks living *la vida Linux*. And eLinux.com *(www.elinux.com)* serves up nearly 42,000 Linux-supported products, from rack-mountable servers to programming books. The site's community tools include informative articles, a weekly newsletter, discussion forums, and Linux-related news from various newswires.

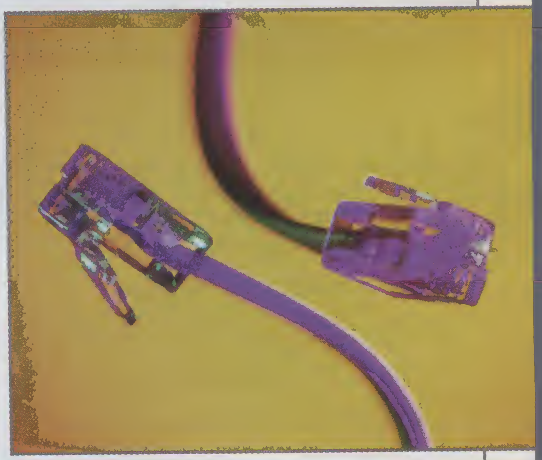
If you crave games, stop by Compuexpert.com *(www.compuexpert.com)*, a site specializing in games for the PC and Mac. (Sorry, PlayStation lovers, no console games here.) The well-stocked categories include racing simulations, sports, strategy, and adventure. You'll find lots of information about each title and plenty of screenshots. Click the Top 20 tab to find out what's hot, or the Coming Soon tab to preorder upcoming titles.

Deal-crazy shoppers will appreciate the 7-24.com Outlet Store *(www.7-24.com)*, purveyor of computer hardware and electronics closeouts. This site's a great source for hard-to-find media and accessories for SyQuest, Avatar, and Iomega Ditto drives. In the Electronics area of the Outlet Store, you'll find telephones, digital cameras, and other gadgets.

If it's cheap software you're after, visit ArcaMax *(www.arcamax.com)*. You'll find Windows and Mac software titles, most priced at $7.95 and all with free shipping. The catalog includes business software, clip art, games, and reference titles. You won't find Microsoft Office for $8, but you will find lots of software choices for kids and adults. The catch: Most titles are a version out of date.

get hooked up

IF YOU'VE GOT THE NEED TO NETWORK, PLENTY OF SITES WILL HELP HOOK YOU UP.



Cables, cords, and wires are the glue that holds a computer network together, and Cables To Go *(www.cablestogo.com)* sells them all, from the esoteric system-specific to the standard SCSI. You'll also find networking products, bulk cable, tools, and test equipment. Browse the catalog online, or download a printable PDF version. Check the data sheets and FAQs for helpful tips, how-tos, and detailed technical specs.

If that doesn't fill your networking needs, stop by Black Box Network Services *(www.blackbox.com)* for everything from cabinets and racks to desktop-telephony equipment. If you need an unusual cable or adapter, use the Custom Cable wizard. Black Box offers technical help by phone, e-mail, or fax, and promises an answer within 15 minutes.

Computer users who hack hardware and push the outer limits of PC speed by overclocking know that a cool computer is a happy computer. The Card Cooler *(www.thecardcooler.com)* offers an astounding selection of fans and heat sinks to cool your overworked PC. The site offers computer cases specifically designed for cooling. One has six—count 'em, six!—built-in fans to keep your PC downright frigid.

PalmGear.com *(www.palmgear.com)* is the software spot for Palm OS PDA users. The site offers commercial, shareware, and free software, including financial apps, games, and travel aids. You'll also find Palm-related news and FAQs. Subscribe to one of the mailing lists to receive news, software announcements, tips and tricks, or special-deal alerts.

If you're itching to get your hands on the latest cell phone, or you want to replace your current plan, visit WirelessAdvisor.com *(www.wirelessadvisor.com)*. Enter your ZIP code, and the site will display a list of wireless, cellular, and digital PCS carriers in your area. If you don't know where to begin, there are plenty of articles for newbies, such as "How to Choose a Wireless Phone Service" and "Analog, Digital—What's the Difference?" Discussion forums and a glossary round out the features.

Surf over to Beach Camera's site *(www.beachcamera.com)* for a vast selection of cameras, photo printers, and other gadgets for shutterbugs. You'll find all types of cameras: digital and film, video and still, point-and-shoot and SLR. The site lets you create side-by-side comparisons of features, accessories, and prices. And if you're tired of those accidental close-ups of your thumb, check the catalog of photography books to improve your skills.

Get the best cellular service at WirelessAdvisor.com.

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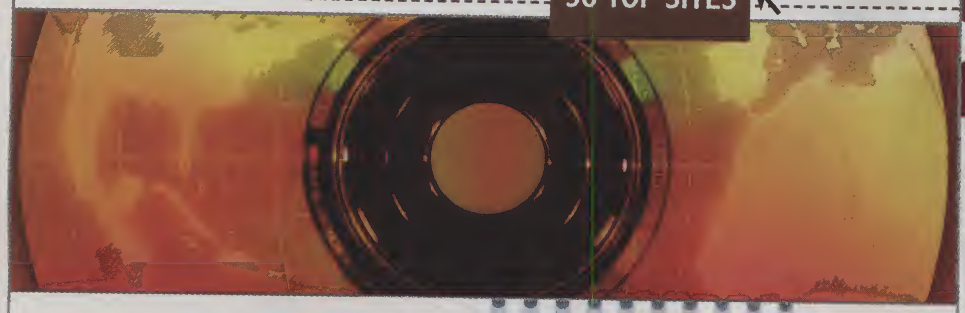


that's entertainment

READY FOR SOME DIVERSION? POP IN A DVD, SHOP FOR SOME TUNES, OR HUNT FOR SOME LAST-MINUTE TRAVEL DEALS.

Watching DVDs is fun; renting them, less so. Two sites, NetFlix.com *(www.netflix.com)* and Rentmydvd.com *(www.rentmydvd.com)*, save you a schlepp to the store. For $19.95 a month, NetFlix lets you rent as many DVDs as you can handle, up to three at a time. No due dates, no late charges—just send the movies back when you're done, and NetFlix will send the next entries on your wish list.

Rentmydvd offers a similar service with a different fee structure: $13.95 per month for two DVDs out at a time, $23.95 for four, and $49.95 for 10. Less rabid movie watchers can pay $3.50 to rent a single DVD for nine days. And if after watching your flick you just have to own it, you can buy it for 30 percent off retail.

If music is your passion, visit EMusic.com *(www.emusic.com)*, where you can buy legal MP3 files. EMusic currently lists 170,000 songs by 8,000 artists, including Bob Marley, Creedence Clearwater Revival, and They Might Be Giants. Check out the free 30-day trial; if you like it, a three-month subscription costs $14.99 per month, and a 12-month subscription, $9.99 per month.

Monster auction site eBay doesn't fit into this collection of lesser-known shopping sites, but its younger sibling, Half.com *(www.half.com)*, does. Half.com sells used books, music, movies, and video games, along with a smaller selection of computers, electronics, sporting goods, and trading cards. The site is particularly easy to use; just search or browse for the products you want, and pay for them by credit card. Half.com processes the transaction. If an item's out of stock, you can request an e-mail update when it becomes available, via the Wish List feature. Thousands of sellers nationwide compete on Half.com, so you can pick the best deal. And the buyer-protection policy covers you for the first $750 of every purchase.

Stocked up on reading material and ready for a vacation? Before you take Route 66 or explore Area 51, surf over to Site59.com *(www.site59.com)* for last-minute travel deals, including airfare, hotels, and show tickets, without pesky advance-purchase restrictions. The Local Flavor section will help you find a getaway to suit your mood, whether you crave sports and adventure or something romantic. (At press time, location choices were limited to New York and Washington, D.C.) One suggestion in the Quirky & Offbeat section was an evening of fencing instruction following by an aphrodisiac-laden dinner.

Hotwire *(www.hotwire.com)* is a noteworthy site for travelers on a budget. Its prices for airline tickets, hotel rooms, and rental cars can be significantly lower than those of other travel sites, and there's no advance-purchase requirement. But like better-known Priceline.com, you won't know which airline you'll be flying or which hotel you'll be staying at until after you've paid. And you won't earn frequent-flyer miles for these travel deals.

Owners of MP3 players should check out EMusic.com.

live a little

IF YOU PREFER TO SPEND YOUR DISPOSABLE INCOME CLOSE TO HOME, RESTRICT YOUR TRAVELS TO THE WEB BY VISITING A FEW OF THESE HOME-FURNISHINGS SITES.

Design Within Reach *(www.dwr.com)* sells beautiful furniture in styles ranging from classic to modern. The catalog includes tables, chairs, and beds, along with outdoor furniture, rugs, and lighting. The company produces a traditional print catalog, but the site's Online Only category offers products you won't find in print.

For home-decorating ideas, visit Ihomedecor.com *(www.ihomedecor.com)*. You can shop by product category, such as candles, vases, clocks, and frames, or browse items that fit into your home's style, including modern, country, and Asian.

Stylish accessories for your kitchen are available at Tabletools.com *(www.tabletools.com)*. The Table Store serves up dinnerware, flatware, coffee and tea sets, and linens. Check out the Kitchen Store for cookware and kitchen gadgets such as bagel cutters and ice-cream scoops. You'll also find bar and wine accessories in the Bar Store. Special features include an online gift registry and an e-mail newsletter. (Subscribers

Seat yourself in style at Design Within Reach.

get free shipping for orders of more than $25 for a limited time.)

Now that the interior of your home is decorated, it's time to work on your outdoor space. Beautify your garden, patio, or deck with custom address markers, sundials, fountains, birdhouses, and hammocks from OutdoorDecor.com *(www.outdoordecor.com)*. The site professes to have the largest selection of weather vanes on the Web.

Moving on to the driveway, if its occupant is looking a little worse for wear, cruise over to CarsDirect.com *(www.carsdirect.com)*. The site can walk you though every step of the new-car-buying process. Read the reviews,

Need a roadster? Visit CarsDirect.com.

select a vehicle with the options you want, and apply for financing, all online. CarsDirect.com offers a low-price guarantee and extended-warranty options.

If all this online shopping has you tuckered out, take a nap. The Company Store *(www.thecompanystore.com)* provides everything you need for pleasant dreams. Its selection of bedding includes sheets, quilts, and comforters, and pillows in all shapes and sizes. You'll find towels, bathrobes, and other bathroom essentials in the Bath Shop, and bedding, furniture, and clothing for children and babies in the Company Kids section.

nifty gifts

NEED AN INTRIGUING GIFT FOR SOMEONE WHO HAS EVERYTHING? AT THESE SITES YOU'LL FIND EVERYTHING FROM FOODSTUFFS TO FREQUENT-FLYER MILES.

EthnicGrocer.com supplies treats from around the globe.

If you don't think of a tape dispenser or paperweight as an intriguing gift, the Museum of Modern Art Online Store *(www.momastore.org)* may change your mind. You'll discover plenty of other unusual and beautiful items for the home, including tableware, furniture, and lighting, all with a generous 90-day return policy. MoMA's Adult and Children's Toys section features unusual diversions for playful people of all ages.

A cuddly teddy bear can be the perfect gift for any child—and, let's be honest, many adults. The Vermont Teddy Bear Company *(www.vermontteddybear.com)* sells more than 100 bears, each with a lifetime guarantee. You can buy a bear for just about any occasion and personalize it to your taste. The Get Well Bear, for instance, can come with a crutch, a custom-embroidered sling, or a bandage in the location of your choice. Check the Bear Galleries to see holiday, job-related, and any-occasion bears.

Lush *(www.lushcanada.com)* specializes in handmade cosmetics and bath products. The Canadian site offers an enticing array of shower gels, shampoos, soaps, and fragrances to cleanse your body while relaxing your mind, along with shaving lotions, skin creams, moisturizers, and massage bars. Can't decide? Check the site's selection of wrapped gift samplers for your favorite bubble-bath addict.

Stylish Barnes & Wagner Gifts *(www.barnesandwagner.com)* specializes in hand-blown glass by the 100-year-old Blenko Glass Company. Its beautiful carafes, vases, glasses, and bowls can make expressive and unusual gifts. You'll also find decorative objets d'art, such as glass apples, fish, and pond floats.

RedEnvelope *(www.redenvelope.com)*, taking its name from the Asian tradition of presenting gifts in red envelopes, is a site specifically for gift givers. Last-minute shoppers will appreciate the Express Gifts section, which promises same-day shipping and overnight delivery if you order before midnight. Gift ideas are sorted by occasion, recipient (girlfriend, baby, business associate), lifestyle (executive, romantic, gadget guru), and specialty shops (home and garden, sweets, and toys), sparing you pages of inappropriate gifts. Corporate gifts include gourmet baskets, wine, cigars, office decor, and executive toys.

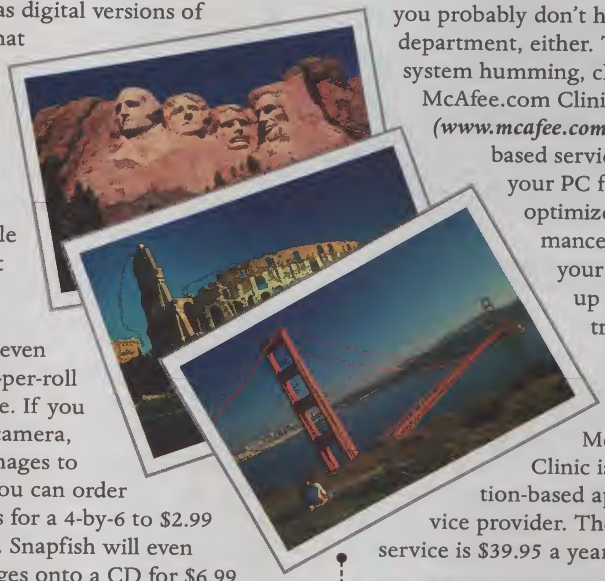
Rubber clocks can be found at the MoMA Online Store.

50 TOP SITES

at your service

ON THE WEB, YOU CAN BUY MORE THAN JUST PRODUCTS. IT'S EASY TO FIND THE PROFESSIONAL SERVICES YOU NEED.

One of the most enduring Web services is film developing. Send your film by mail to Snapfish.com *(www.snapfish.com)*, and you'll get back prints as well as digital versions of your images that you can view on the Web or e-mail to friends. At $1.99 per roll and another $1.99 for double prints, it's a lot cheaper than your local photofinisher, even with the $1.99-per-roll shipping charge. If you have a digital camera, upload your images to Snapfish and you can order prints (59 cents for a 4-by-6 to $2.99 for an 8-by-10). Snapfish will even burn your images onto a CD for $6.99.



Print your vacation photos at Snapfish.com.

If you want to display your photos on your own Web site, Homestead.com *(www.homestead.com)* can help you build it. Homestead Personal helps you create a simple home page from a template in just minutes; Homestead Professional offers more advanced tools for businesses. Personal Web pages are free; monthly fees for business sites start at $29.99. The Community Center features discussion boards and links to members' sites.

Bigstep.com *(www.bigstep.com)* is another option for building a business Web site. The basic service is $9.95 per month, and gives you site-building instructions and tools. It also provides 12MB of storage space. Optional premium services include domain names, expanded storage space, and up to 10 e-mail addresses.

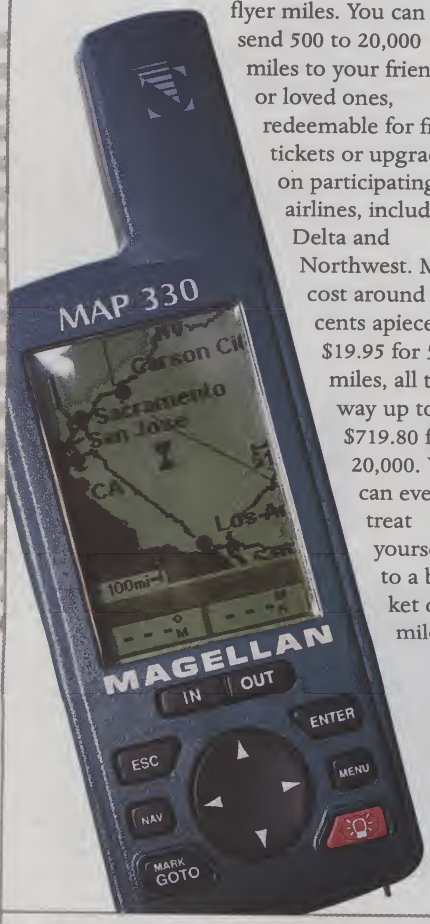
If you don't have a Web designer, you probably don't have an IT department, either. To keep your system humming, check it into the McAfee.com Clinic *(www.mcafee.com)*. This Web-based service protects your PC from viruses, optimizes its performance, and keeps your applications up to date. Unlike traditional system-maintenance software, McAfee.com Clinic is a subscription-based application service provider. The cost for the service is $39.95 a year.

Sometimes software alone won't do the job; you need help from a live human. That's where the PC Support Center *(www.pcsupport.com)* can help. Free membership gets you access to disk-maintenance tools, software updates, a virus scanner, and interactive PC tutorials. For $149.99 per year, you get a Preferred

The Best To You *(www.thebesttoyou.com)* creates custom gift baskets bearing everything from fruit to gourmet confections. Creative theme baskets include Chocolate Fantasy, The Gardener (complete with flower seeds and gardening gloves), and Mexican Fiesta (including chips and margarita mix). Housewarming, holiday, and baby baskets round out the selection.

Still hungry for gift-giving ideas? Even more foodstuffs are available from EthnicGrocer.com *(www.ethnicgrocer.com)*, including thousands of baking, cooking, and ready-made products from around the globe. Shop by country (15 are represented) or by product category. The catalog includes snacks, beverages, and sauces—everything to bring home the taste of the Old Country. You'll also find cookbooks and clever gift crates like sushi- and paella-making kits. Whet your appetite with printable regional recipes.

Here's a slightly offbeat gift idea. Miles4Sale.com *(www.miles4sale.com)* sells "gift baskets" of frequent-flyer miles. You can send 500 to 20,000 miles to your friends or loved ones, redeemable for free tickets or upgrades on participating airlines, including Delta and Northwest. Miles cost around 4 cents apiece—$19.95 for 500 miles, all the way up to $719.80 for 20,000. You can even treat yourself to a basket of miles.



Give the gift of a GPS receiver from RedEnvelope.

Share Your Secret Shopping Sites

The sites mentioned here are just the tip of the iceberg. The Web is home to thousands of wonderful but underappreciated stores. Tell us about your favorites. They don't have to sell computer products; feel free to tell us where you buy your heirloom tomato seeds, piñatas, or sheet music. Go to ***www.zdnet.com/computershopper/bestsites.***

To pick up a Dreamcast on the cheap, stop by Switchouse.

Membership, with round-the-clock support by e-mail or online chat. If you're really stuck, the remote-repair feature lets a technician diagnose and fix your PC over the Internet. Unfortunately, the site doesn't support Mac or Linux users.

Once your computer is running smoothly, you may find that trading stuff can be as much fun as selling stuff. If you want to swap your dusty CDs and books for something new, check out Switchouse *(www.switchouse.com)*. This bartering community helps members find people to swap things with, and it's free. You can buy and sell items if you'd like, but the seller must pay a 10 percent fee. Categories include music, video games, movies, books, computer hardware and software, and electronics.

If online auctions are more your thing, visit AuctionWatch.com *(www.auctionwatch.com)*. The universal search engine canvasses many auction sites and fixed-price sites in one fell swoop. For those who are selling, the Auction Manager offers one-stop control of all your auctions, delivering image-hosting and post-sale tools. The News & Information section provides daily auction news, feature articles, and helpful tips for buyers and sellers.

As long as you're in the mood to spend money, make sure you're not spending more than you have to. Ebates *(www.ebates.com)* can shave dollars off purchases at your favorite online stores. You'll get a rebate check of up to 25 percent after making a purchase. Ebates offers rebates at more than 400 e-commerce sites, including plenty of big names, such as Outpost.com and Barnes & Noble.com.

Okay, it's time to log off and find another form of entertainment. Step away from the computer and over to the phone to call Tellme Networks (800-555-8355) for stock quotes, news headlines, sports scores, movie listings, even games to pass the time. Other services include driving directions, wake-up calls, and Phone Booth, which you can use to call anyone in the United States for free. You can personalize your experience at Tellme's Web site *(www.tellme.com)*. Create a stock portfolio, and Tellme will read info about your stocks the next time you call in. You can also customize horoscopes, sports, news, and weather information.

Now you've got everything you need for your computer, your home, your garden, and even your friends' gardens, all from sites you may never have heard of—until now. ▼

Smart Shoppers, Smart Choices

For many online shoppers, bigger means better. A feeling of security comes from purchasing from a big-name online store. But a company doesn't have to be listed on the NASDAQ to provide a secure and worthwhile shopping experience. Here are some guidelines for online shopping at any Web site, large or small.

- A good e-commerce site will be speedy and easy to navigate. If it's not, you're not likely to stick around long enough to find the products you're looking for. Smaller sites may lack fancy features such as wish lists, product reviews, and related-products links, but as long as the site is easy to get around, those features are not essential.
- You don't need a huge selection. The small, focused selections at some Web stores can be a boon. Shoppers spend less time wading through countless products they don't need. When shopping for computer accessories, for instance, you can save time by frequenting a store that specializes in inkjet cartridges or motherboards. You may even find a broader selection of the products you do want.
- Check the customer-service pages to make sure the seller's policies on ordering, shipping, and returns are posted and agreeable. Are shipping methods and charges clearly explained? Can you return a defective product, or one you simply don't like? Is there a restocking fee for returns? Also, before you place an order, look for an e-mail address and phone number and write them down.
- Customer service is the cornerstone of a good shopping experience. As anyone who's ever waited on hold for a representative can tell you, the largest companies are frequently the ones that make you wait the longest. When you have a question or a problem, smaller companies can often provide better service than big companies.
- A quality e-commerce site will have a good reputation with its previous customers. Check consumer-ratings sites such as BizRate.com *(www.bizrate.com)* and Gómez.com *(www.gomez.com)* to find out if a site's reputation is up to par. The smallest sites may not register on these sites' radar screens, however.
- Make sure the site uses a secure server to encrypt your credit-card number and other personal information. A locked-padlock icon at the bottom of your browser window indicates a secure, encrypted connection.
- What if you're overcharged or your order never arrives? As long as you paid by credit card, you're protected if things go wrong. Contact your credit-card company immediately to have your charges placed on hold while it investigates the problem.